

## Cost of MX 'Race Track' Is Debated

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Disagreement is surfacing within the Carter administration over the cost of the "race track" system for basing a new intercontinental missile.

New cost estimates working their way through the bureaucracy are billions of dollars apart in a program that already has engendered controversy and promises more.

Air Force planners and some key Pentagon civilian analysts are confident that the cost of building and operating a 200-missile system for 10 years, while higher than recently thought, will be under \$30 billion.

Other estimates are higher still with some analysts warning that any prediction is likely to be "soft" given the uncertainties involved.

The new missile, called the MX, is a matter of intense interest in the debate over U.S. strategic strength that has accompanied Senate consideration of the new strategic arms limitation treaty with the Soviet Union.

Because of this debate, and because the importance of technical requirements of the treaty, much attention has been focused on details of how the weapon will be based.

It must be deployed so that it can survive a Soviet surprise attack while at the same time permitting high-confidence counting by Soviet spy satellites.

After wrestling with these seemingly paradoxical requirements for some time, the administration appears ready for the "race track" system. It will involve a total of 4,600 missile shelters built in clusters of 23 linked by an oval track. Each cluster will be the home of one missile. Special transporters will move the missile from one shelter to another in secret.

Soviet missilemen would not know which shelter to shoot at. And even if they found out, the system includes the ability to rush the missiles to a new hiding place after an attack is under way.

For arms control purposes, the shelters will have plugs that can be lifted out to permit satellites to count the missiles.

New figures worked out by the Air Force and analysts in the Defense Department's research and development groups indicate all this can be done for \$28.4 billion, a figure about a billion more than previous public estimates.

A group composed of representatives of the Office of Management and Budget, the Air Force and the Pentagon's program analysis section took a different approach and came up with higher figures. This combined group was told to look at costs after top administration policy-makers settled on the race track.

This group looked at a number of modifications beyond a bare-bones system. By some accounts, this approach produced a 10-year price tag as high as \$37.7 billion.

One of the largest areas of disagreement is on how much ought to be built in to cover uncertainties. Air Force personnel who operate the systems contend it can be significantly less than the cost estimators have built into their predictions.

The cost estimators are maintaining, however, that uncertainty, or risk, is the one thing they are certain of in a construction project as large as the one contemplated for the MX.

The issue goes to Defense Secretary Harold Brown this week to be passed on to other Cabinet-level officials concerned with the issue.

The MX is intended as a replacement for the Minuteman missiles in fixed silos. These weapons, which are the mainstay of the U.S. strategic force on land, will be vulnerable to Soviet attack beginning in the early 1980s.